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Knox, C. (2008). Kazakhstan: Modernising Government in the Context of Political Inertia. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 74(3), 477-496.

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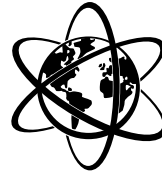
**Published in:**  
International Review of Administrative Sciences

**Publication Status:**  
Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2008

**Document Version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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## Kazakhstan: modernizing government in the context of political inertia

*Colin Knox*

### **Abstract**

Kazakhstan declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. Since then it has witnessed a remarkable economic transformation under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Pursuing a policy of 'economy first and then politics', Kazakhstan is under growing pressure to engage in political reforms which include a modernization agenda to improve public service provision. Recent constitutional reforms have received a lukewarm reaction from the international community that Kazakhstan is keen to become part of. At the same time a progressive agenda of public services reform is well under way rooted in new public management and a desire to become much more customer focussed in their orientation. This article examines the parallel themes of political reforms and public services modernization in Kazakhstan.

### **Points for practitioners**

This article offers two key points for practitioners. First, it describes the detail of public sector reforms taking place in a developing country which secured its independence approximately 16 years ago, and the significant progress since then. Second, it poses questions about the political context in which administrative reform can take place. Has the existence of a highly centralized and autocratic form of presidential leadership resulted in a top-down imperative which has helped the pace of public services modernization in Kazakhstan?

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**Keywords:** developing countries, governance, Kazakhstan, modernizing, performance measurement, public management reform

## Introduction

The Republic of Kazakhstan is located in Central Asia bounded in the west by the Caspian Sea, in the north by Russia, in the east by China, and in the south by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is the second largest of the former Soviet Republics with a population of 15.4 million people. It is the largest country in Central Asia and one of the most sparsely populated in the world. Kazakhstan was formed as an autonomous Republic within the Russian Federation in August 1920 and became a Republic of the Soviet Union in 1936. The Supreme Soviet elected Nursultan Nazarbayev first Kazakh president in 1990 and declared state sovereignty. In December 1991 Nazarbayev won uncontested presidential elections (98 percent of the vote) and Kazakhstan declared its independence from the Soviet Union and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 1995, a referendum approved the extension of the President's term of office until 2000; however, he called an early election in January 1999 and was returned for a seven-year term.

The most recent Presidential elections were held in December 2005 when Nazarbayev won a third term with more than 90 percent of the vote. The elections attracted negative commentary from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which claimed they had not met international standards, citing failings such as: campaign restrictions, interference at polling stations, multiple voting, pressure on voters, media bias and restrictions on freedom of expression (Keesing, 2005). These claims were strongly contested by the Caspian Information Centre Election Observation Mission, led by the UK's Lord Parkinson, which concluded that 'at this election, Kazakhstan has taken a major step forward in becoming a full democracy' (Parkinson et al., 2005). Zharmakhan Tuyakbayev of the opposition coalition, *For a Just Kazakhstan*, claimed the results were an unprecedented violation of the constitution and laws, accusing Nazarbayev of creating a totalitarian government. President Nazarbayev, on the other hand, defended his record in government citing successes such as: dealing with the aftermath of Soviet-era nuclear testing and toxic waste dumping; building an independent country without violence or a split along ethnic or religious lines; and significant financial and economic reforms. The extent of Nazarbayev's electoral victory suggests that few Kazakh people were willing to risk their material gains, even for the sake of greater democracy, freedom of the press and a crackdown on corruption, all of which were promised by the opposition parties.

Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan engaged in a programme of economic reforms where prices were liberalized, trade distortions reduced, and small/medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) privatized. The treasury and budget processes were dramatically improved. More recently, a framework for public resource management was introduced which lays the foundation for a modern civil service. The creation of a National Fund (in 2000) to save part of the revenues from oil and other extractive industries has been used to increase social spending and share the benefits of economic growth. Since 2000 the economy has shown significant signs of improvement with GDP annual growth in 2006 at 10.6 percent (World Bank, 2007) and projected

growth of 8 percent between 2008 and 2012. The government is attempting to promote economic diversification in the non-oil sector. Diversification into labour-intensive sectors is necessary for growth in employment and incomes, as well as to reduce the economy's vulnerability to swings in the price of oil.

It is against this political and economic background that we consider politico-administrative reforms in Kazakhstan, in particular recent constitutional changes and an extensive programme of public services modernization. This article will outline the juxtaposition of a public sector reform programme in the context of political inertia, due largely to a highly centralized state dominated by an elite form of decision-making. It will examine the hypothesis (Larbi and Bangura, 2006: 282) that democratization (particularly competitive politics) redefines the environment for public sector reforms by creating 'the political space and opportunity for citizens to demand reforms or for some groups to voice concerns and/or oppose certain aspects of the reforms'. Specifically, the article explores the relationship between democratization and public management reforms in a post-Communist central Asian country.

The empirical evidence for this article is drawn from a number of sources. The European Commission supported public sector reform in Kazakhstan through the development of the Eurasian Civil Service Training Centre established in Astana. Under this project, the author was directly involved in developing and delivering academic modules for civil servants across a number of ministries in Kazakhstan. Further European Commission funding was offered to support the development of performance standards in Kazakhstan. Data gathered through direct involvement in both these projects forms the substance of the arguments in this article. In addition, the author interviewed a number of senior officials in Kazakhstan ministries on the constituents of the reform agenda, the implementation process and wider political developments. Although some information sources are managed by the State, there is an increasing degree of openness among a new generation of public officials in Kazakhstan. This is helped by their exposure to international education opportunities which are supported through a generously funded government scheme — the Bolashak programme. In-service officials who are successful in obtaining international qualifications are fast-tracked to senior positions in the civil service and oversee the ongoing public sector reform agenda. The article begins by considering the literature on new public management and its application in developing/transitional countries.

## **Public management reform**

New public management (NPM) has undergone many iterations from its conception by Christopher Hood (1989) who described its principal themes as a shift away: from an emphasis on policy towards measurable performance; from reliance on traditional bureaucracies towards loosely coupled, quasi-autonomous units and competitively tendered services; from an emphasis on development and investment towards cost-cutting; from classic command-and-control regulation towards self-regulation; and allowing managers greater 'freedom to manage' according to private sector corporate practice (summarized in Lynn, 2006: 107). With the passage of time, new public management has also been described as 'a rather chameleon-like and paradoxical creature — something that springs up for different reasons in different places'

(Homburg et al., 2007: 5). If this is true of developed countries, then it is even more apposite when discussing changes in the public sector within developing and transitional countries.<sup>1</sup>

One such transitional country is Kazakhstan which has embarked on a public sector reform agenda under the rubric of its official development strategy *Kazakhstan 2030*. Have these reforms been guided by the wider trends in new public management or has Kazakhstan been judicious in the adoption or adaptation of a modernizing agenda best suited to its economic, social and political circumstances? Coombes (1998: 418), in examining reforms in Central and East European states (specifically Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia) following the collapse of communist regimes in the late 1980s, noted the 'pervasive and irresistible intervention' of public authorities in the daily lives of its citizens. As a result, he argued that reform of public administration is more crucial in transitional states. Yet, in adopting administrative reforms from Western Europe in their quest for modernization, the effect 'could be less of a departure from past ills than their prolongation in somewhat different forms' (Coombes, 1998: 422). The same argument is made by Verheijen (1998: 416) who poses the question whether new public management reforms are the 'wrong medicine' for Central and Eastern Europe and concludes that none of the main models applied in Western Europe are suitable as a whole, advising decision-makers in these states 'to pick and choose from examples of good practice in OECD countries'. The problems associated with direct read-across of new public management reforms between Western Europe and CEE states are instructive when considering such transfer potential to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

## Theorizing New Public Management

The adoption or adaptation of new public management in developing/transitional countries is under-theorized and, where it is discussed, tends to be located in debates about public management in mature democracies and convergence towards a standard set of global managerial practices. Ferlie and Fitzgerald (2002) theorized public management reforms in the UK, using the health sector as a case study, by drawing on institutionalist theory (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1983, 1987; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Greenwood and Hinings, 1993; Ferlie et al., 1996). They argued there is an in-built tendency towards isomorphism in public sector organizations leading to stability and a high degree of resistance to change. As a result, organizations develop into 'archetypes' which comprise three elements: the formal structure; systems of decision-making, and underlying interpretive schemas, which include core values, beliefs and ideology. From an institutionalist perspective, if there is to be transition in organizations then these three elements must change simultaneously, but such archetypical transition is unusual. Ferlie and Fitzgerald argue that the UK *has* undergone an archetype shift from a previously dominant public administration archetype to a novel public management archetype and conclude that it is 'a sustainable model' which 'has successfully reproduced itself' (Ferlie and Fitzgerald, 2002: 352).

Does institutionalist theory help to understand public management reform in developing/transitional countries? McCourt (2002: 234), reflecting on why there has

been a 'modest' implementation of managerialism in developing countries, argues that inertia, as asserted in the institutionalist theory, provides only one explanation. For example where corruption is a real problem, as is often the case in developing countries, the old public administration model with its emphasis on financial probity is more appropriate. Importantly, McCourt (2002: 237) contends that a different explanation is needed as to why the status quo prevails, namely: 'changes that been canvassed including new public management, are politically infeasible'. There is therefore a 'need to understand the political context in developing countries to understand why change is so difficult'. This includes an acknowledgement of the vested interests which support the status quo, typical of which is the presence of oligarchies in authoritarian regimes. McCourt (2002: 238) concludes that while institutionalist theory points to isomorphic change or convergence, there is an alternative explanation of 'stasis ... in which political and other factors arrest convergence'. Lack of movement to adopt managerialism in developing countries may, according to McCourt, 'be as significant as movement towards convergence'.

A more recent addition to the literature, complexity theory (Haynes, 2003; Mittleton-Kelly, 2003), is emerging which argues that institutional theory offers a relatively static account of the implementation of public management reforms. Teisman and van Buuren (2007) suggest that if we focus on the dynamics of implementation processes, then differences in the outcomes of new public management reforms can be better understood beyond the accepted explanatory dimensions of the reforms themselves and the institutional context in which they reside. They argue that the final shape of managerial reforms is not only context specific but also process specific, reflecting the dynamics of the implementation process. At the core of their argument is the claim that the implementation of public management reforms is a co-evolutionary rather than a linear process and 'out of this co-evolutionary process, trajectory between different parts of the system (organisation, process, chain) and its environment, the concrete (but never definite) shape of the new public management reform emerges' (Teisman and van Buuren, 2007: 183). This theoretical interpretation is offered in the context of managerial reforms in West European governments and remains unexplored in developing/transitional countries. The overriding conclusion from an analysis of managerialism in West European countries is that:

Reforms that constitute new public management are crafted, shaped, implemented and interpreted in specific institutional contexts. Although this line of argumentation is rather susceptible to oversimplification, it is at the same time attractive in the sense that it explains changes in scope, focus and speed of specific reforms in terms of the institutional context in which the reforms are implemented. (Homburg et al., 2007: 5–6)

While these European scholars stress the importance of differences associated with type of reform, institutional context and co-evolving developments as likely influences which shape public management reforms, they also identify challenges for future research, one of which is to examine the starting points of reform. They suggest that 'the institutional breeding ground moulds, shapes and reinforces particular elements of new public management reforms, and is therefore an important variable for meaningfully explaining how NPM reforms are shaped and crafted in various national

settings' (van Thiel et al., 2007: 202). The starting point for managerial reforms in post-communist states is particularly interesting in this respect and offers potential to explore whether their origins provide one explanation for the shape of reforms which have taken place and if there might be convergence or divergence in a cluster of states such as the CIS. Examining Kazakhstan as a case study in public management reform will provide an opportunity to consider this further.

## A global model?

Cross-country transfer raises a wider issue debated in the literature as to the global nature of public management reform (Lane, 2000; Kettl, 2005). Pollitt (2003: 38), for example, argues that while public management ideas 'have had a wide influence' and there are 'certainly broad trends in ideas', the interpretation and implementation of reforms have been patchy, messy, diverse and reversible. Mathiasen (2005) concurs by suggesting that 'what is transferable' has been part of the debate since the beginning of new public management because of its international nature. 'The "under what conditions" question applies to the political and cultural context in which change take place' (Mathiasen, 2005: 667). The context-dependent nature of 'what works' in public management reforms has prompted commentary that few researchers go much beyond 'specifying the criteria that are important in particular contexts' because of the absence of a robust theory of contexts (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004: 197). While recognizing this limitation, Pollitt and Bouckaert offer 'a model of influences on public management reform' which shows interactions between: background socioeconomic influences, political pressures and features of the administrative system itself. The model, they argue, allows for 'considerable variation between countries . . . in the sense that each country has its own distinctive political and administrative system' (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004: 37). The model derives its empirical evidence from Anglo-Saxon countries, continental European and some Nordic countries — no Central and East European countries or Commonwealth of Independent States were included at the first stage of its development.

McLaughlin and Osborne (2002: 11–12), while acknowledging critics who questioned whether public management 'could be deployed as a tool for comparative analysis let alone global reform prescriptions' (Lynn, 1998; Kickert, 1997), went on to claim that new public management 'does still stand as, at worst, one of the two dominating paradigms of public management across the world at the turn of the new millennium'. The breadth of this assertion which presumably encompassed countries as diverse as Australia, Canada and the UK to Sierra Leone and Mozambique (top and bottom of the UNDP human development index) is difficult to accept. Mathiasen (2005: 645), on the other hand, argues that 'convergence has probably fulfilled its usefulness as a fruitful basis for discussion' and, in any case, public management is a 'patchwork of practices, many of which existed before the broader concept was articulated'. Pollitt (2007: 24) adopts a mixed position when he argues that the evidence to support a 'strong' version of convergence on the NPM model simply doesn't exist because there is too much diversity, difference and rejection, but nevertheless there *is* evidence that many continental European countries 'have made selective and limited use of certain of its elements or instruments'.

Several scholars have specifically considered new public management as applied to developing and transitional countries (Schick, 1998; Batley, 1999; Polidano, 1999; Manning, 2001; McCourt, 2002; Larbi, 2006). Larbi, for example, examined evidence of applying public management in developing countries under two broad strands – managerial improvement and organizational restructuring (e.g. performance standards and decentralization) as a cluster of ideas; and markets and competition (e.g. purchaser/provider split, customer orientation and an emphasis on quality) as another group of reforms. His conclusions on managerialism in developing countries are equivocal:

While the New Public Management may not be a panacea for the problems of public sector management in developing countries, careful and selective adaptation of some elements to selected sectors and activities may be beneficial. Implementation needs to be sensitive to operational reality . . . It is now accepted that context does matter in the design of reforms. (Larbi, 2006: 48)

McCourt (2002: 234) claims that although there are significant instances of implementing new public management in developing countries, the extent of implementation is 'modest and still in its infancy in many places'. He refutes the notion that managerialism is a global paradigm and argues that where governments have tried to implement reforms, new public management practice 'gets refracted through the prism of a particular country's laws, cultures and political imperatives' (McCourt, 2002: 234). McCourt concludes that what is needed is indigenous public management models better suited to developing countries.

There is also evidence that although public management has had a significant influence on the design of reforms in developing countries 'the actual implementation is rather thin on the ground and the outcomes are uncertain' (Larbi and Bangura, 2006: 277). Drawing on research from attempts by several developing countries to introduce reform, Larbi and Bangura (2006) make several general observations, *inter alia*:

- Some of the failures and weaknesses in reforming developing countries are due to lack of attention to politics and the process issues in the design, introduction, implementation and management of reforms.
- It is important to understand who the key actors in the reform process are and their motivations – key actors include state elites (bureaucrats and politicians), interest groups (trade unions and civil society groups) and donors.
- There is little known about the relationship between public sector reforms and the democratization process with the latter often fragile in developing countries.

It is to the latter that we now turn our attention by examining in some detail the parallel tracks of attempts to democratize Kazakhstan and at the same time introduce new public management reforms.

### **Kazakhstan: phases of development**

Kazakhstan is a presidential republic initially modelled on the Constitution of the French Republic (1958). A presidential system of government is characterized by a



constitutional and political separation of powers between the legislative and executive branches of government. Executive power is thus vested in an independently elected president who is not directly accountable to, or removable by, the Assembly (Heywood, 1997). Kazakhstan favoured a presidential system of government as a necessary response to the economic and political crises which accompanied the collapse of the USSR. Presidential government provided the authority and leadership to tackle economic reforms as a priority and with the urgency needed to address the Soviet legacy. It was seen as a pragmatic approach to a crisis which demanded immediate and decisive actions. A limited process of change in the system of government had begun before independence with modifications to the Constitution of Kazakhstan Soviet Socialist Republic proposed by the *Supreme Soviet* (the Soviet Union's standing parliament). A law entitled 'About the Establishment of the Post of President' (April 1990) was intended to pave the way for the national election of a President but the *Supreme Soviet* proved slow and ineffective in making the necessary transformation. The *Declaration on State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan* in 1991 was a legal, political and ideological turning point in the history of Kazakhstan and established the status of the President as head of state and the supreme executive and administrative authority (Ertysbaev, 2001). The presidential elections followed in the same year.

The period 1991–95, from independence until a new constitution was adopted, can be characterized as the first stage in the formation of Kazakhstan's statehood. Tentative steps were taken towards political pluralism, and limited democratic changes emerged. The overriding emphasis was to tackle economic recession and build a solid foundation for recovery by exploiting the country's considerable mineral wealth. During this period, power and authority rested exclusively in the hands of the President and Executive. The rationale for such an approach was that political development and reform could not take place without a stable economy and good inter-ethnic relations — the so-called 'first economy, and then politics' era. As one observer put it:

It was the President's conscious decision to grant priority to economic transformation, moving political reform away to some indefinite future. The Parliament does not have any real power in Kazakhstan, so passing government dictated bills in both its chambers is not a difficult task . . . The authoritarian authorities in Kazakhstan have not only initiated economic changes, but they have become a guarantee for the country's stability. (Wolowska, 2004: 48)

President Nazarbayev argued that evidence (unstated) has shown only when gross domestic product per capita is greater than US\$6000 can democracy become viable (Nazarbayev, 2007a). The basis of this assertion remains unclear, but Kazakhstan has now exceeded this level — in 2007 its GDP per capita was US\$6669 (World Bank, 2007).

The second phase in Kazakhstan's development was the period 1995–2000 that witnessed not only significant economic transformation but also limited political improvements. A new constitution (1995) provided for a democratic, secular state and a presidential system of government. During this period the socioeconomic strategy document *Kazakhstan 2030: Prosperity, Security and Improvement of*

*Welfare for Kazakhstan Citizens* was launched (1997) and became the template or master plan for progress towards a market economy. With an improving economy and political stability, international investors provided capital for the development of local industry resulting in an emerging middle class. An environment was evolving conducive to political pluralism, regular elections, a growing civil society and some diversity in the mass media.

The most recent phase in the country's development from 2001 onwards has consolidated Kazakhstan's strong economic performance as a regional leader – GDP doubled between 2000 and 2008. With the economy performing well, attention shifted to democratic reform aimed at improving public services, increased accountability, and transparency of executive bodies. A State Commission for the 'Development of Democratic Reforms' was established in March 2006 under the chair of the President and committed itself to a political reform agenda, the objectives of which were:

- To make the liberal and democratic reforms in Kazakhstan systemic and irreversible by mobilizing the efforts of the Government and civil society institutions.
- To ensure that the majority of the population embraces and adopts democratic traditions with a view to establishing society as a 'consolidated democracy', and to strengthen the social base of the reforms.
- To achieve political reforms that represent a compromise among all the forces of society who have joined together to meet the challenges facing them (Abdykarimov, 2006).

To date the State Commission has implemented a number of initiatives to enhance the political process in Kazakhstan: one-third of the governors are elected in districts and regional centres instead of being appointed; a strategic framework for the development of civil society (covering the period 2006–11) has been formulated and approved; and the Commission has made a significant contribution to drafting the law on local self-government. Importantly, the State Commission prepared constitutional proposals on further political development. These included ideas to strengthen the authority of Parliament and other representative bodies, the promotion of local self-government, strengthening judicial and law-enforcement systems, developing civil society and political parties, and amending the Constitution in order to provide a legal base for effective democratization.

In May 2007 the two chambers of Parliament unanimously endorsed the proposals emerging from the State Commission on Democratic Reforms, its ad hoc working group, and the associated amendments to Kazakhstan's Constitution. The changes were signed into law by President Nazarbayev. Therein the State Commission supported the preservation of the presidential form of government but backed a redistribution of powers and responsibilities in favour of an enhanced role for Parliament. These changes imply a shift from a 'presidential' to a 'presidential-parliamentary' republic by increasing the legislature's role. Importantly, the amended Constitution places a two-term limit on presidents with each term being reduced from seven years to five. However, President Nazarbayev is exempt from this change 'in recogni-

tion of the historic role the first president has played in the establishment of our state, as one of the founders of our new independent Kazakhstan' (Zhumbabayev, 2007: 7). In effect, this permits Nazarbayev to be re-elected as many times as he chooses — his current tenure is due to end in 2012. The President will, under the changes, need to seek Parliament's endorsement for his choice of Prime Minister. The role of the courts is enhanced. The package also increased the number of members in Parliament and provided for more seats in the lower house (*Majilis*) to be filled according to the proportion of votes won by political parties.<sup>2</sup> The Deputies will also have a greater say in picking regional governors (*akims*) who will see their terms reduced from five to four years. Constitutional changes increase the role of the Assembly of the People, a unique instrument to preserve the religious and ethnic peace and mutual tolerance of Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. The American ambassador praised the constitutional reforms package as 'a good step forward' (*The Economist*, May 2007: 10).

Opposition parties, however, question whether the reforms represent a real shift in power. Parliament, they claim, will continue to be an obedient tool of the President which rubber-stamps his decisions. Aidos Sarimov, a political analyst at the Altynbek Sarsenbayev Foundation, an opposition-linked think tank in Almaty, argued: 'from now on, the President will be able to dissolve Parliament any time he wants. According to the new amendments, the President will also be able to disband local councils, which is totally undemocratic. If presidential powers were expanded by 15 points, parliamentary powers were uplifted by only five, which resulted in a further imbalance in Kazakhstan in favour of the President' (Holley, 2007: 7). Strengthening Parliament therefore poses little risk to the President and could be a way of retaining political influence after he steps down, according to his critics. Supporters of the constitutional reforms refute these criticisms and argue that both chambers of parliament have been strengthened in an evolutionary process to a presidential-parliamentary form of governance.

In an effort to legitimize the constitutional changes, President Nazarbayev called for an early dissolution of Parliament ahead of the official end of its legislative term in 2009 and elections took place on 18 August 2007. Party candidates were voted in via a system of proportional representation with 98 *Majilis* seats to be shared out by those parties which won more than 7 percent of votes. The remaining nine seats were reserved for representatives of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. The outcome of the elections was perhaps predictable. The party of Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev (Nur-Otan) won a landslide 88 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections, leaving the opposition with no seats. Neither the Social Democratic Party nor its moderate rival Ak-Zhol surpassed the 7 percent threshold for gaining seats, winning 4.6 percent and 3.3 percent of the votes, respectively (the Kazakh opposition had previously held a single seat in Parliament). Nur-Otan holds all 98 seats which were up for election. The OSCE report on the elections 'welcomed progress' over previous elections, while saying 'a number of international standards were not met', particularly during the vote counting process. Consiglio Di Nino, a Canadian senator who led the OSCE's monitoring team commented: 'notwithstanding the concerns contained in the OSCE report, I believe that these elections continue to move Kazakhstan forward in its evolution towards a democratic country' (Di Nino, 2007: 11).

## Elite decision-making

Despite public moves towards constitutional reform and greater democratization, Kazakhstan is dominated by a formal political elite and a highly centralized power base comprising the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan and key stakeholders therein: the State Secretary, Head of Administration and Security Council Secretary. Cummings (2005) argued that the elite system is a compelling factor behind the emergence and maintenance of authoritarianism in Kazakhstan. These factors include:

The strong control of institutions by the executive elite; obstacles to the emergence of oppositional movements through alternative institutional foci or incentives and also inhibiting the possibility of institutions playing an intermediary role; the associated absence of systemic cushions that would make it easier for oppositional members to exist outside the incumbent elite; a high degree of elite reshuffling preventing security of tenure; various attempts at the centralisation of recruitment, including through centre/region crossovers; a general attitudinal elite consensus in favour of top-down central control; and, a strategy of compartmentalisation which acts as a substitute for full-scale reform. (Cummings, 2005: 140)

The Administration of the President is the dominant centre of decision-making in Kazakhstan but it operates within a triad involving the President, Cabinet of Ministers and the Security Council. Ministers exercise considerable autonomy over social and economic matters and hence are influential in the policy-making process. The Security Council, chaired by the President, has more recently emerged as an organization used by him to exert power over the state machinery and to purge corrupt officials. There have been high profile dismissals such as Kayrat Karibzhanov, President of the Kazakh Telecom joint-stock company, and all his team who were sacked by Security Council when it was revealed that his monthly wage was \$365,000! While the Administration of the President, Council of Ministers and Security Council represent the key formal actors in 'administering the summit', there are signs that their role in policy-making and 'speaking the truth to power' is being becoming less exclusive (Guy Peters et al., 2000). The importance of the role played by the State Commission on the Development of Democratic Reforms is a case in point. Given the centrality of this Commission to the future political reform agenda of Kazakhstan, not least in the area of decentralization, it might have been expected to have drawn on established elites. In fact, while chaired by the President, its membership comprised speakers from both chambers of Parliament, leaders of registered political parties and public associations, members of parliament, government representatives and public figures (although the most outspoken political leaders were not included). The Commission undertook its work in a widely consultative way, arriving at a public consensus on the political modernization agenda.

The formal structures and processes of decision-making do not, of course, fully reflect the extent of political elitism in Kazakhstan which, like other post-Soviet countries, tends to be personalized. Political elitism is compounded by the fact that Kazakh opposition parties are in disarray and fractured, offering no real alternative to the voting public. The social stability of Kazakhstan is based on the President's personal power, rather than on institutions and procedures. His control of the distributive state

has allowed him to continuously increase his popularity by providing substantial increases in pension benefits and civil service salaries. In the President's annual address (28 February 2007), he announced a doubling of childcare benefits and raised the basic pension, with the promise that its level would equal 40 percent of the minimum cost of living. From January 2007 salaries of civil and public servants have increased by 30 percent. The changes suggested under the Constitution could be seen as part of the President's preparations for a power transfer in 2012. He has said, 'it's time we laid a legal basis to ensure the success of the liberal reforms that we have begun, to switch to a new balance of state and public interests, a new system of checks and balances' (Nazarbayev, 2007b). Parliamentary elections in 2007, however, produced a legislature without any opposition lawmakers. The personalized nature of the political elite has been played out in a very public way in Kazakhstan when President Nazarbayev ordered a criminal investigation into the alleged involvement of his son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev in the kidnapping of two bankers and fraud at Nurbank. Stripped of his property before being tried, and divorced by his wife, Aliyev is now a political outcast. A second presidential daughter (Dinara) and her husband (Timur Kulibayev) now appear ascendant in the family dynasty.

### **Governance and administrative reforms**

Modernizing government has been a core element in efforts to reform the political process more generally. The aims of the public sector reform agenda are set within a long-term vision for Kazakhstan outlined in the official development strategy *Kazakhstan 2030*. The proposed administrative reforms are:

- To increase the effectiveness of the government working collectively as a state organ and individually through the role of each minister.
- To implement modern information technology and eliminate bureaucracy in government bodies.
- To create an effective and optimal structure of state bodies.
- To restrict state interventions in the economy.

There has been encouraging progress made on some public sector reforms. Civil servants have access to career development opportunities, including funded study abroad, aimed at increasing their professional skills. Productivity and effectiveness measures are being introduced, linked to performance incentives and output measures for delivering higher quality public services. A new code of honour was introduced in 2005, demanding certain standards of ethical behaviour and stricter penalties/disciplinary procedures for officials found guilty of corruption. An e-government programme has been in place since 2006 to provide citizens with fast and reliable access to public services on-line. This has included the creation of a network of public electronic centres where people without direct access to the internet can avail themselves of on-line services, examples of which are: filing tax returns and making tax payments, pension fund deductions, property registration and setting up in business. To complement these developments, a growing number of one-stop-shops are in operation offering citizens access to a range of public sector information and services across

several ministries. These have proved to be highly popular with citizens more used to being shunted from one public body to another by poorly motivated civil servants lacking in customer orientation. One-stop-shops already offer the potential to address corruption and criminality among officials. Reducing personal points of contact lessens opportunities for corrupt practices. The role of the state in providing public services is also under review. Public–private partnerships are developing as an alternative to state provision, and the potential for NGOs delivering public services collaboratively with ministries or individually is evolving. These moves are part of a more general trend in opening up erstwhile state functions to the private sector in areas where the government believes they could be better delivered.

One of the most recent and significant reforms to take place in Kazakhstan is the introduction of performance standards for public services. This development appears to have been ignored by analysts of public sector reform in developing countries. Verheijen and Dobrolyubova (2007: 205), for example, assert that Latvia, Lithuania and Russia are ‘the only three post-Communist states that have sought to introduce comprehensive performance management systems in the public sector’. In fact, performance measurement in Kazakhstan is a central plank in their reform strategy aimed at improving the quality of public services. In January 2007, a Presidential decree entitled ‘Measures aimed at Modernizing the Public Administration System in the Republic of Kazakhstan’, set out the main priorities as follows:

- To improve the quality of public administration processes, procedures and public service provision.
- To improve professional skills, efficiency and coordination of the state apparatus.

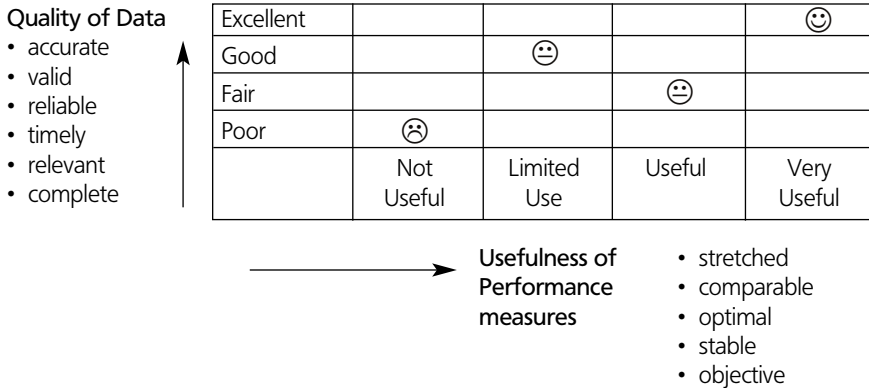
A legislative framework was established to achieve these goals through amendments to the existing law on ‘administrative procedures’. This resulted in government resolutions to implement public service provision model standards and *reglements* (or public service charters) for all government bodies. According to the decree, the introduction of service standards will be implemented alongside measures to improve the structure of government, the development of annual reporting systems, audit of the efficiency of the activity of government organizations at central and local levels, introduction of a performance rating system and regular surveys of the public to evaluate public service quality (Shirokova, 2007).

During 2006 service *reglements* were piloted in four ministries (Health, Labour & Social Development, Justice and Finance) and two regions (Chimkent Oblast and Almaty City Akimat). *Reglements* include information about the main principles of serving the public and key performance indicators on quality and accessibility of public services in a form and language accessible to service users. They also include explanatory information on filing a complaint in cases where a citizen is dissatisfied with the standard of public services on offer. Draft *reglements* were developed for 33 pilot services in the four ministries and two regions above. By the end of 2007, 15 *reglements* were adopted and published in the press or on the web-site of the Agency for the Civil Service, the Republic of Kazakhstan. Hence significant progress has been made on the introduction of performance management. The main principles of public service provision (i.e. timeliness, quality, accessibility, politeness and a complaints procedure) have been approved. Key performance indicators have been

developed which measure these principles when applied to selected services in the pilot entities. Guidelines have been drawn up to assist in the development of service standards and the introduction of *reglements*. In addition, officials from ministries, regional trainers and akimats have undergone training on the introduction of *reglements* and performance indicators.

Moving beyond the pilot services depends on embedding a system which supports the collection of good quality data. In other words, the success of the *reglements* is dependent on the robust gathering, monitoring, control and validation of the data which underpin them. This involves several challenges for the public sector in Kazakhstan at this point in the modernization process. Systems need to be put in place in all public sector organizations for collecting high quality performance measurement information. The data gathered to measure performance need to be both internally and externally validated. The former is the role of internal auditors, still underdeveloped in Kazakhstan, and the latter a new independent Agency proposed within the Prime Minister's Office. The performance of each public sector organization will be reported annually, disseminated widely and made easily accessible to the general public. The annual report will include, *inter alia*, a table showing how well the organization has achieved on its key performance indicators against targets set to improve the quality of services. The table will report on the five criteria: timeliness, quality, accessibility, politeness and complaints procedure. Alongside this, internal and external audit reports will provide the public with an assurance that any reported improvements (or deterioration) in performance is based on reliable and valid data. Kazakhstan has adapted a version of the UK's comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) framework to report on the quality of public services performance data (see Figure 1). The new Agency within the Prime Minister's Office will develop a Kazakhstan-wide database which will serve two purposes. First, it will develop league tables of comparable public sector bodies and publish the results. Second, it will become a benchmarking hub where organizations can share learning, disseminate good practice and compare their own performance with others.

In the medium term, there are aspirations to create an incentive system regulated by the Agency at the level of both the best performing organizations and civil servants therein. This, however, demands embedding a robust system of performance management in the ways outlined above. Experience elsewhere suggests that this is difficult to achieve in practice. Verheijen and Dobrolyubova (2007: 214) refer to the vulnerability of performance-based management in circumstances where the final step of 'translating overall performance objectives into individual performance targets and creating a sense of personal responsibility for results amongst civil servants, has not been completed'. Kazakhstan reformers are looking to embrace a wider more challenging *national* standard of customer service excellence in public services by adapting the UK Charter Mark scheme. To enable this to happen, investment is taking place in three broad areas. First, computerized information systems are being funded which gather performance and other management control data. Second, the audit function, both internal and external, is a central part of any performance management process. There is investment in training qualified auditors to oversee and validate improvements in public sector services. Third, training in performance measurement is taking place across various levels, from senior managers charged



**Figure 1** Public services: performance measurement Kazakhstan model

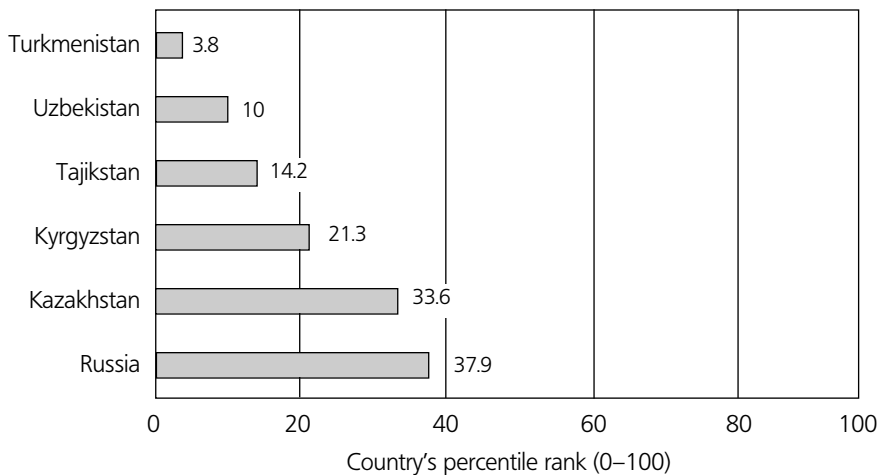
with strategic responsibility through to those at the coal face whose job it is to deliver performance improvements. The intention is that each understands the importance of his/her contribution to more customer-focused public services in Kazakhstan.

The success of the reform agenda to date is captured in 'worldwide governance indicators' which report aggregate and individual governance indicators for 212 countries along six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability; political stability and the absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption (Kaufmann et al., 2007). The aggregate indicators combine the views of a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries. The individual data underlying the aggregate indicators are drawn from a diverse variety of survey institutes, think tanks, non-government organizations and international organizations. We consider the indicator 'government effectiveness' here. Government effectiveness measures the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. Drawing on the most recent data, we present the effectiveness of Kazakhstan's government in comparison to its nearest CIS neighbours: Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows the percentile rank of each of the six selected CIS countries measured in terms of government effectiveness. Percentile rank indicates the percentage of countries worldwide that rate below these countries. Higher values indicate better governance arrangements. In the case of Kazakhstan, therefore, 33.6 percent of countries rate worse on government effectiveness and just over two-thirds of countries rate better. The more important observation here is the relative position of Kazakhstan to its nearest CIS neighbours, ranking a close second to Russia (at 37.9 percent). Hence the government's effectiveness is relatively high, by comparison, and testifies to the ongoing success of the public sector modernization agenda in Kazakhstan.

In summary, Kazakhstan has made significant progress in terms of public man-





**Figure 2** Government effectiveness

agement reform, although much remains to be done and customer oriented public services are still some way off. That said, there are encouraging signs of progress along the following lines:

- The state bureaucracy is being rationalized and attention focused on integrated service delivery (joined-up government).
- A review of the pay and performance of civil servants has established the principle of an outputs-based system where the quality of services is paramount.
- Allied to the above development is the adaptation of private sector quality standards (ISO) in some public services.
- Corruption measures have been put in place to detect and punish public officials involved.
- Performance measurement, although at the early stages, has been embraced at the most senior level of the public sector and is seen as a key element in the modernization of public services in Kazakhstan.

## Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from this case study of Kazakhstan which has explored 'the little known relationship between public sector reforms and the democratization process in developing countries' (Larbi and Bangura, 2006: 282)? Larbi and Bangura hypothesized that democratization defines in a positive and receptive way the environment for public sector reforms to take place. In fact, Kazakhstan as a case study demonstrates that political stability through autocratic rule has been a key explanatory variable in securing public management reforms. Because of the form of political leadership in Kazakhstan there is a central autocratic imperative to modernize public services with evidence of considerable progress along a number of lines.

Key administrative reforms have taken place in anti-corruption measures, a code of ethics for civil servants, streamlining of public sector organizations, and an overall reduction in the size of the civil service. There has been a huge investment in one-stop-shops in a very short period of time. Most recently, performance measurement and a customer service orientation offer the prospect of systemic changes in the way public services are delivered in Kazakhstan. The fact that the government has resolved to implement public service *reglements* for all government bodies testifies to the significance of this reform and support for the modernization process more generally.

Since independence, Kazakhstan has adopted a clear prioritization process: economic, political and public management reforms, respectively. Its economic success can be clearly evidenced. Political reforms aimed ostensibly at changing the balance of power away from a highly centralized executive in favour of the legislature have so far failed to create, in an amended constitution, an effective system of checks and balances. At the same time, a progressive modernization agenda in public sector reform is ongoing. This agenda has drawn on international experiences in helping to create a customer-focused public service and is being implemented largely through legislative instruments at a pace which is impressive given the starting point. The reform agenda has achieved considerable impetus and authority as a direct result of a top-down political imperative for change and accompanying local and international donor resources to implement the modernization of public services.

Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2004) model of explanatory public management reform variables (interaction between: socioeconomic forces, political system, elite decision-making and administrative system) could be applied to understand what has happened in Kazakhstan. We have described how Kazakhstan is an example of elite decision-making writ large with a centralized power base and a strong economy located within a long-term implementation plan in the form of *Kazakhstan 2030*, updated yearly. But the main explanatory variable in Kazakhstan is political leadership. Verheijen (2003: 496) argued that convincing political leadership is the key condition for progress to be made and politicians need to be educated about the benefits of public management reforms 'if a review of administrative reform in post-Communist states undertaken in the next 10 years time is to yield more than a few partial illustrations of success and a sometimes demoralizing large number of cases of reform failure'. Mathiasen (2005: 646) makes a similar point by suggesting that former communist countries 'recognize that their inherited public management systems are incompatible with the responsiveness and transparency that are inherent in democratic systems'. Yet Bebbington and McCourt (2007: 18) claim that although leadership is frequently identified as a key explanation of development success, 'political leadership is not well understood' and we 'lack an understanding of how much room political leaders have to manoeuvre in their political environments'. Nazarbayev appears, through his autocratic stewardship of a successful economy and political stability, to have secured considerable manoeuvrability in Kazakhstan.

This contrasts starkly with his central Asian neighbours: the Kyrgyz Republic, whose political situation remains fragile and where there are many fragmented voices within government; Tajikistan, the poorest republic of the Soviet Union which has a tenuous legislative and fiscal framework, weak public administration, lacks basic

infrastructure and is hugely corrupt; Turkmenistan, which consistently rejects the adoption of democratic practices and exerts tight state control on all areas of activity; and Uzbekistan, whose political orientation has shifted from a Western orientation in favour of Russia and China. It seems that the West European experience, where 'the institutional breeding ground moulds, shapes and reinforces particular elements of new public management reforms' (van Thiel et al., 2007: 202), has limited reach across in Central Asian countries. The communist origins of CIS countries appear to matter less than political autocracy and economic progress which have driven significant public management reforms in Kazakhstan. In short, there is evidence of divergence within CIS countries in their approach to public sector reforms. The political elite of Kazakhstan can point to their recent (November 2007) success in being offered the chair of the OSCE (in 2010) as a political triumph in the face of patchy democratic credentials. Kazakhstan has finally been accepted as an equal player in global affairs. Its ostensible attempts at democratization yet demonstrable progress in public management reforms must have played a part in its new-found international status. The Kazakhstan example would seem to indicate that there is no prerequisite association between democratization and successful public management reforms.

## Notes

- 1 Where the precise boundaries exist between developing and transitional countries is unclear. Kazakhstan, for example, using the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), is classified as a 'medium human development' country and has a HDI of 0.794, ranked at 73rd out of 177 countries with available data (UNDP, 2007).
- 2 The number of deputies of the Parliament will be increased to 154 people. This includes an increase by 30 of *Majilis* representatives and eight new senators.

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